SEARCHING THE FAMILY

Common Sense or Invasion of Privacy?

KELLY FOREMAN | PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

A new and uncertain trend is evolving surrounding the concept of familial DNA searching after several significant cases have been solved through offenders' family members.

The Grim Sleeper — a Los Angeles man accused of killing and assaulting 10 women over the span of more than two decades — was caught after a familial search of California prisons revealed an inmate whose DNA closely matched that of the unknown suspect found at crime scenes. The inmate was the killer's son.

The Bind, Torture, Kill murderer in Kansas also took the lives of 10 people over a span of 30 years before his daughter's DNA linked the 59-year-old compliance officer directly to the crimes.

In the United Kingdom, a trail-blazing leader in using DNA for investigative purposes, the widely-published Shoe Rapist case culminated in the arrest of a man 20 years after his crimes when his sister's DNA linked him to the rapes and attempted rape of six women.

These cases and several others have made familial searching a hotly-debated issue in scientific circles, politics and the media alike. A familial search is not the same as a close-match search, which often results from a traditional DNA database search in which a hit occurs that is not a perfect match, but is close enough that the offender is likely a close family member of the person in the database.

Familial searching is intentional and targeted, conducted only after a traditional search has come up empty.

"Unlike a routine database search which may spontaneously yield partial match profiles, familial searching is a deliberate search of a DNA database conducted for the intended purpose of potentially identifying close biological relatives to the unknown forensic profile obtained from crime scene evidence," according to the FBI's website. "Familial searching is based on the concept that first-order relatives, such as siblings or parent/child relationships, will have more genetic data in common than unrelated individuals."

Only a handful of states are performing familial searching to date — those being California, Colorado, Texas and Virginia. The U.K. is most famous for its use of familial searching, and has developed extensive protocols for their process.

"One of the key components responsible for the effectiveness of the U.K.'s system is that the search is not based upon genetics alone," the FBI website states. "Age, and more importantly, geographic location, are combined with the genetic data to produce a ranked list of potential relatives of the unknown forensic profile."